

Nature or Providence? On the Theoretical and Moral Importance of Kant's Philosophy of History

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In his essay, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim," Kant writes that history can be regarded as following a "plan of Nature." Nature "decides" to give humankind certain predispositions, she "wants" these to be developed, and she "knows" what is best for humans (see *Idea*, VIII, 19–21, 30).¹ We find similar phrases in §83 of the *Critique of Judgment*, in *Perpetual Peace*, and other writings. Nature here appears personified, as having a will, intelligence, and power. In other texts Kant speaks of "Providence" in a similar way (for example, CB, VIII, 120–123; Rel, VI, 122, 123 n.).

This rhetoric might seem to be nothing more than an outmoded metaphor, and hence a feature that does not deserve our philosophical interest. But metaphors are not always philosophically innocuous, and Kant himself famously criticizes Herder for using them in a way that blurs the distinction between philosophy and poetry (see HR, VIII, 60). Given that Kant struc-

¹References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* are to the pages of the first (A) and second (B) editions. All other page references are to *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, edited under the auspices of the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902–). Translations are my own, but I have benefitted from existing translations, especially those in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. Abbreviations used: Anth = *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Standpoint*; C1 = *Critique of Pure Reason*; C2 = *Critique of Practical Reason*; C3 = *Critique of Judgment*; CB = *Conjectural Beginnings of Human History*; CF = *Contest of the Faculties*; HR = *Review of Herder's Ideen*; *Idea* = *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*; MM = *Metaphysics of Morals*; Ped = *Lectures on Pedagogy*; PP = *Perpetual Peace*; Rel = *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*; TP = *On the Common Saying: This May Be True in Theory but It Does Not Apply in Practice*.

tures entire texts, such as the "Idea for a Universal History," in terms of what Nature does and wants, saying that this talk is metaphorical, instead of enabling us to disregard it, makes its proper interpretation more pressing.²

Because it is not immediately clear how they should be interpreted, it may look like Kant uses the concepts of Nature and Providence in an uncritical or dogmatic fashion. Thus, Harry van der Linden calls Kant's use of the terms "awkward and confusing" and tries to reformulate them in a way that avoids personification.³

Several other authors, however, have recently defended Kant against the charge of dogmatism. All agree that his personifying terminology is merely a manner of speaking.⁴ Allen Wood has pointed out that Kant's talk of Nature as "wanting" various things should be read in the context of his view of teleology. On this view, Nature personified is nature regarded as a teleologically ordered whole. This teleological view of nature is a regulative, heuristic principle that helps us make nature more intelligible to us. Kant does not (dogmatically) claim to know that there is teleology in nature. Rather, his claim is that, given the constitution of our cognitive faculties, the teleological principle is useful.⁵

But what about the difference between "Nature" and "Providence"? Here, we find little agreement. Many authors have treated the two as synonymous, and this approach we find, for instance, in a recent essay by David

²I restrict my discussion to the issue of the proper interpretation of the terms "Nature" and "Providence." I do not here address the implications of Kant's use of these terms. Thus, I do not address the issue of whether the view that nature promotes historical progress entails that moral action is superfluous. For this issue, see my "Kant, History, and the Idea of Moral Development," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 16 (1999): 59–80.

³See Harry van der Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), 100; cp. 319, n. 10. See also Frederick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790–1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 54–55.

⁴See Louis Dupré, "Kant's Theory of History and Progress," *Review of Metaphysics* 51 (1998): 813–28; Pierre Laberge, "Von der Garantie des ewigen Friedens," in *Immanuel Kant: Zum Ewigen Frieden*, ed. Otfried Höffe (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995), 149–70; David Lindstedt, "Kant: Progress in Universal History as a Postulate of Practical Reason," *Kant-Studien* 90 (1999): 129–47.

⁵See Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 215–25; Robert B. Louden, *Kant's Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 141–44.

Lindstedt, who regards "nature as working providentially" as a practical postulate analogous to that of God.⁶

Pierre Laberge and Louis Dupré are more sensitive to the fact that Kant on occasion prefers one over the other and that the terms cannot, therefore, be regarded as synonymous. Both authors argue that Kant, in his mature works, prefers the term "Nature" over "Providence," because he wants to avoid the stronger metaphysical and religious connotations of the latter. Given that the term "Nature" directs us to look to nature instead of appealing to a supernatural cause, it is much more appropriate than "Providence."⁷

The problem with designating "Nature" as Kant's preferred term is that he himself repeatedly and explicitly expresses a preference for "Providence" over "Nature." In the essay, "Idea for a Universal History," Kant calls the view of history that he proposes in this essay a "justification of Nature—or better, of Providence" (VIII, 30, my emphasis). And in "On the Common Saying: This May Be True in Theory but It Does Not Apply in Practice," he speaks of Nature forcing us in a certain direction, and says that we can expect progress in history "from her, or rather from Providence alone (because highest wisdom is required for the complete realization of this end)" (VIII, 310).

With regard to the "Idea for a Universal History," one could try to explain Kant's preference for "Providence" by pointing to the fact that this is an early text, written before Kant worked out his account of teleology more fully in the *Critique of Judgment*. This is the line taken by Pierre Laberge, who argues that Kant starts out with a preference for "Providence" over "Nature" but reverses it later. The problem with this strategy, however, is that it does not take account of Kant's expressed preference in "On the Common Saying," a text from the 1790s, which provides a straightforward counterexample to Laberge's (and Dupré's) interpretation.

What makes the relationship between "Nature" and "Providence" even more puzzling is that Kant, in the "Idea for a Universal History," despite

⁶Lindstedt, "Kant," 143.

⁷See Dupré, "Kant's Theory of History and Progress," 816; Laberge, "Von der Garantie," 150–52. Michael Pauen has argued that Kant "secularizes" the philosophy of history by choosing "Nature" as the moving principle of history and denying any role to providence. See his essay, "Teleologie und Geschichte in der Kritik der Urteilskraft," in *Aufklärung und Interpretation: Studien zu Kants Philosophie und ihrem Umkreis. Tagung aus Anlaß des 60. Geburtstags von Reinhard Brandt*, ed. Heiner F. Klemme, Bernd Ludwig, Michael Pauen, and Werner Stark (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1999), 197–216.

expressing his explicit preference for "Providence," in fact himself uses "Nature" in almost all cases. Even if we suppose that he came to prefer "Providence" late in the process of writing the manuscript, it still seems an unusual case of sloppiness on Kant's part not to replace the earlier occurrences of "Nature" with the better term.

In short, the hermeneutical challenge is to explain what the difference between the terms consists in, why Kant sometimes expresses a preference for "Providence," and why he does not "clean up" his own manuscripts accordingly.

In this essay, I develop an account that meets this challenge on all three counts. Moreover, I argue that the issue we are dealing with here is not merely terminological, but that it is symptomatic of a much more important and not sufficiently appreciated fact about Kant's philosophy of history, namely, that it fulfills a function in both his theoretical and his practical philosophy.

I develop this account by first looking at Kant's purpose and methodology in the essay, "Idea for a Universal History." This will require situating the essay against the background of some of the epistemological concerns of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. I then show that Kant's purpose in the essay is twofold, and that he shifts from using "Nature" to "Providence" at the point where he shifts his discussion from the theoretical question of the order in history to the moral relevance of the view of history presented in the essay. The connection between the shift in terminology and the shift in focus explains, finally, why Kant does not erase earlier occurrences of "Nature" when he expresses a preference for "Providence" at a late point in the article. After developing this argument on the basis of "Idea for a Universal History," I show that Kant's terminology in his other main writings on history is consistent with this interpretation.

I.

The Twofold Role of the Teleological View of History. Most commentators interpret Kant's philosophy of history as a part of either his theoretical or his practical philosophy, with the majority of authors defending the latter interpretation. Thus, the relevance of historical progress for the moral sub-

ject, in Kant's thought, has been amply acknowledged in the literature.⁸ The basic idea here is the following. According to Kant's moral theory, we can determine how we ought to act without engaging in a consideration of what is empirically feasible, but this raises the question of whether morality's demands can be empirically realized. Because this very question already presupposes a solution to the problem of what we ought to do, the question does not concern what we ought to do, but rather, what we may hope. In answer to this question, Kant argues that we have good grounds for regarding history as a teleological process toward the better, thus grounding the hope that our moral and political ends can be realized.

But history actually poses a philosophical problem for Kant in another respect as well. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he claims that we naturally regard the phenomenal world as a systematic unity, and that this view of the world is justified as a regulative principle to help satisfy reason's need for systematicity. The difficulty is that history, conceived as the realm of appearing human actions, seems to be utterly chaotic, at least at first glance. Given Kant's claim that reason naturally strives for systematic unity, he cannot simply rest content with the view that human history is fundamentally chaotic. This problem of what to do about the apparent chaos of history is the question with which Kant starts out in "Idea for a Universal History," and to appreciate Kant's use of the idea of teleology in his answer, we should first look more closely at the relevant views expounded in the first Critique.

In the first Critique, Kant argues that human reason strives to establish a systematic unity of knowledge: "Under the government of reason, our cognitions are not permitted to form a rhapsody; instead, they should form a system" (A832/B860). A "systematic" whole is a unity in which the parts are interconnected in conformity with a single principle (A645/B673). In the first Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic, Kant defends the idea that the use of regulative principles for classifying objects and connecting empiri-

⁸See William James Booth, *Interpreting the World: Kant's Philosophy of History and Politics* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1986); Michel Despland, *Kant on History and Religion* (Montreal: McGill-Queens's University Press, 1973); William A. Galston, *Kant and the Problem of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975); Otfried Höffe, *Immanuel Kant* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1983); Van der Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism*; Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*; Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

cal laws is permitted,⁹ because such principles enable us to systematize our knowledge of the physical world. They are not constitutive of experience, but merely principles that help order the experiences presented to reason by the understanding. In the second Appendix Kant goes on to defend the use of the teleological principle that everything in nature serves some good purpose, on the grounds that reason can arrive at the "greatest systematic unity" only when it is allowed, for heuristic purposes, to "also connect things according to teleological laws" (A686-88/B714-16). The teleological view of nature has a merely regulative, not constitutive status, that is to say, it serves as a guideline for connecting empirical cognitions into a systematic whole, but it does not itself determine experience. Whether there is in fact teleology in nature cannot be known in the strict sense of the word.

In the first Critique, Kant immediately applies the teleological principle to nature as a whole. We should "not merely consider certain parts of nature" from the teleological point of view, but "make this systematic unity of nature completely *universal*" (A691/B719).¹⁰ He claims that one can make many discoveries with the help of this regulative principle. Searching for "wise purposes" and teleological connections in nature can lead to finding more physical laws and establishing their interconnection. Teleological heuristic principles are entirely without risk, says Kant, "for the worst that can happen would be that where we expected a teleological connection (*nexus finalis*) we find only a mechanical or physical connection (*nexus effectivus*)" (A687-88/B715-16).

Importantly, Kant claims that looking at nature as if it were a systematic order implies the use of the regulative idea of a *highest intelligence* (see A670ff./B698ff.). On the basis of the tacit premises that we are not creators of the universe and that our reason is not constitutive for the order in nature, Kant argues that we cannot conceive of the order in nature without also thinking a highest intelligence as its ground. Looking at nature as if it were a systematic unity implies regarding it as if it were ordered by a higher, rational cause. In looking for the systematic unity of the manifold in the universe, we "represent all connections *as if* they were the ordinances of a

⁹On Kant's appeal to a "need" or "interest" of reason in the justification of the use of regulative ideas, see my article, "The Conative Character of Reason in Kant's Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 36 (1998): 77-97.

¹⁰In contrast to the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant does not yet distinguish here between external and internal purposiveness. He applies the teleological principle to the shape of the earth, to mountains and seas, as well as to organisms (A687f./B715f.).

supreme reason, of which our reason is but a faint copy" (A678/B706). This is very different from believing that such a higher cause *exists*. The idea of nature as the product of a designer is merely an idea (a "model," one might say) that we use when we look for order in nature (see A670/B698). This holds for teleological purposiveness as well as for the purposiveness that Kant discusses in the first Appendix (and which he calls "formal purposiveness" in the third Critique).

In the context of his discussion of teleology, Kant provides the hermeneutic key to the interpretation of his personifying use of "Nature." Because we need only the *idea* of a highest intelligence and are not justified in assuming the existence of such a supernatural cause, and because we use this idea for the purposes of research and not religion, it is better to speak of "Nature" than "God." Kant says that philosophers of all times have rightly spoken of the "wisdom of Nature" and of a "divine wisdom" as if they were synonymous expressions, and that they have rightly preferred the first expression when "dealing with speculative reason" because it "avoids asserting more than we are authorized while at the same time directing reason to its own proper field, namely, nature" (C1, A701/B729). And it should be "entirely indifferent, whether we say 'God in his wisdom has willed it to be so' or 'Nature in its wisdom has ordered it so'" (A699/B727). Thus, the idea of a personified "Nature" is actually the regulative idea of God, but because of its weak epistemic status as a regulative idea and to highlight the fact that this idea is used merely in the service of the investigation of nature, "Nature" is preferable to "God."

If we now turn to the "Idea for a Universal History," we see that Kant uses the term "Nature" in exactly this way. The essay initially focuses on the systematic order in the realm of phenomenal human actions. Kant starts out by saying that, as appearances, human actions should be approached like any other type of natural appearance, which is to say that they should all be regarded as determined by natural laws (see VIII, 17). Moreover, just as we look for systematic order in non-human nature, we naturally hope to be able to order history into a systematic whole (*ibid.*). Yet human history seems to be chaotic and to defy any attempt to present this part of the phenomenal world in a systematic way. This apparent chaos seems "contrary to reason" (*widersinnig*), because it seems to frustrate reason's attempts at systematization (18). In an effort to remedy this problem, Kant employs the principle of natural teleology, and in this context the term "Nature" is appropriate.

Kant develops a regulative idea of history as a teleological process, and he hopes that a future historian will use his proposal as a historiographic guiding thread (*ibid.*). Such an idea is necessary because what Kant says in general in the first Critique also holds for the realm of historiography:

The unity of reason always presupposes an idea, namely, the idea of the form of a whole of cognition, which antecedes the determinate cognition of the parts and contains the conditions for determining the position of every part and its relation to the others. Accordingly, this idea postulates complete unity of the understanding's cognition, and thereby this cognition becomes not a contingent *aggregate*, but a *system* that is internally connected in accordance with necessary laws. (C1, A645/B673; emphasis mine).

The organizing principle of history, according to this idea, is the teleological process of the development of the human rational predispositions. And in conformity with Kant's own recommendations in the first Critique, his idea, presented in the form of nine theses with comments, is phrased from the start in terms of "Nature" having organized things and humans in a specific way (Idea, VIII, 18).

Kant stipulates that this development is fueled in part by social antagonism, and this enables him to accommodate seeming counterexamples. Conflicts and wars—key witnesses of those who deny progress in history—can now be interpreted as stages in a comprehensive developmental process. The negative consequences of their antagonism will lead humans to establish states with coercive powers to administer justice, and it will lead states to join a league that aims at preserving international peace. Peace and the rule of law, in turn, enable and promote the further development of the human predispositions for the use of reason, which culminates in the transformation of society into a "moral whole" (21).

Kant does not claim truth for his idea, but he is confident that it will be useful. He provides a couple of references to empirical history to support his claim that when one looks at the realm of appearing human actions in the way he proposes, the facts fit the model.¹¹ Historiography would start with

¹¹Frederick Rauscher argues that Kant distinguishes sharply between "philosophical history" (which proceeds *a priori*) and "wholly empirical history" (which "must exclude the *a priori* idea of progress"). The fact that Kant tests the historiographical usefulness of his "idea,"

the Greeks¹² and proceed, via the Romans, to the present time. What at first sight seems a pointless succession of the rises and falls of various European empires and cultures, looks instead, from the perspective of Kant's "idea," like a "regular process of improvement of the constitution of states in our part of the world" (29). In and through all the upheavals, humans do gradually develop their capacity to use reason and progress from one "level of improvement" (30) to the next. Kant takes this to support his conclusion that

this idea could become useful; and although we are too shortsighted to understand the secret mechanism of [nature's] workings, this idea may still serve us as a guiding thread for presenting an otherwise planless aggregate of human actions as a *system*, at least when viewed as a whole. (29)

With this, Kant concludes his answer to the question regarding the systematizability of history.

Throughout his discussion up to this point, Kant makes use of and refers to the main tenets of his moral theory. Early on in the essay, he refers to the negative implications of the chaotic view of history for morality (19), and he makes use of moral concepts when he designates the "moralization" of humankind as the *telos* of history (21). Several authors have appealed to these passages to defend the claim that Kant's interest in history is only or predominantly moral, and that his main or only concern in "Idea for a Universal History" is with the conditions of moral and political development, for the sake of morality.¹³

But there are strong reasons for rejecting this interpretation. First, the view that Kant's theoretical interest in history is negligible makes it hard to make sense of several aspects of the text. For example, it requires down-

however, seems to run counter to such a sharp distinction. See Rauscher, "The Nature of 'Wholly Empirical' History," in the *Proceedings of the Ninth International Kant Congress, Berlin 2000*, ed. Volker Gerhardt and Rolf-Peter Horstmann (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, forthcoming).

¹²Kant starts with the Greeks, because he claims that there are insufficient credible sources for the preceding eras. In contrast to many of his contemporaries, he did not regard the Bible as a trustworthy historiographical account (see also CB VIII, 109–10). He restricts his probe to European history without further justification.

¹³Most recently in Paul Guyer, *Kant on Freedom, Law, and Happiness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. 372–407.

playing the importance of Kant's introduction to the essay, as being, for example, merely a "page and a half of generalities."¹⁴ It makes Kant's remarks about the usefulness of the "idea" for a systematic account of history seem awkward and out of place. Another unwelcome consequence of the view that Kant's interest in history is exclusively (or almost exclusively) moral, and the flipside of the previous point, is that he would appear not to deal at all with the obvious difficulties that history poses for reason's quest to establish a systematic unity of knowledge.

Secondly, Kant's use of moral concepts and his references to the moral effects of non-progressive views of history are not sufficient to show that his main concern in the essay is strictly moral. Kant certainly designates the "moralization" of humankind as the final end of history, which means that he takes some of his cues for constructing his regulative idea from the moral realm. But that does not by itself mean that the function of the "Idea" is therefore a moral one. The fact that Kant uses a moral concept in his answer to a theoretical question does not make the question, and therewith the main theme of the essay, a moral one—just as little as Kant's use of the regulative idea of God makes it an essay on God or religion.

A similar point can be made with regard to Kant's mention, early on in the essay, that if history resisted any attempt at order, this would have bad consequences for morality. In his comments on the second thesis, he asserts without further discussion that if the full development of the human rational predispositions were impossible, this would make these predispositions appear purposeless and in vain, "which would abolish all practical principles" (19). This too, however, does not mean that the only or predominant orientation of the article is moral, just as little as Kant's reference to the negative effects of transcendental idealism for the standard proofs of the existence of God (for instance, C1, B xxx) means that the only or main focus of the first Critique is theological. Thus, Kant's references to morality do not stand in the way of our regarding the first part of the essay as genuinely concerned with a theoretical question—a question about the order in the phenomenal world, not a question about how one ought to act or what one may hope.¹⁵

¹⁴Ibid., 372.

¹⁵This is not to say that Kant is concerned, in the "Idea for a Universal History," with providing a set of synthetic *a priori* principles that ground historiography as a science analogous to his effort in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*. The principle that Kant provides in the essay has an explicitly weaker status, namely, that of a regulative principle, a

Nevertheless, although it is not the first focus of the essay, the teleological view of history *also* has moral relevance, and Kant turns to this issue toward the end of the essay. Here he discusses the moral relevance of the idea of progress, arguing that the assumption of a plan of Nature opens up "a consoling prospect for the future." It gives us the prospect of a future in which all rational predispositions of humanity will have been developed completely, and in which humankind fulfills its moral vocation on earth (30). This is "consoling," because if we knew that history were nothing but a perpetual back-and-forth between good and evil, there would be no ground for hope of improvement. In that case, Kant argues, there would be no other option but to direct our moral hope toward "another world," that is, a transcendent world or afterlife. This would lead to despair vis-à-vis the possibility of improving the empirical world, thus creating a potential hindrance to moral action. The assumption of progress enables the moral agent to avoid such despair (30).

Thus, the teleological view of history fulfills an important role for both his theoretical and his practical philosophy. In the one case, Kant formulates a regulative idea in the hope that it may be able to incorporate the seeming chaos into one systematic whole. In the other, Kant argues that we have moral grounds for assenting to this teleological view, because it offers the moral agent the consoling belief that the world is providentially ordered in a way that supports moral progress.¹⁶

With the shift to the moral perspective, the epistemic status of the belief in progress changes from that of a mere regulative idea to that of a practical postulate. This is because the moral point of view justifies a stronger kind of assumption than the theoretical point of view. The theoretical point of view permits the *use of an idea* for heuristic purposes (the use of the teleological idea, connected to the regulative idea of a highest intelligence). The moral point of view, by contrast, justifies the rational *belief* that the

"guiding thread" that may be "useful" for historiographical purposes. My use of the word "theoretical" should not be misread here. I use it in the broad sense in which it is employed by Kant when he opposes "theoretical" and "practical" cognition, for instance, in C 1, A633/B661.

¹⁶This is not to say that it is morally necessary to believe in progress in history. Rather, Kant's argument here seems to be that faced with an independent (theoretical) justification for regarding history from a teleological point of view, the moral agent recognizes an additional advantage of this view insofar as it provides grounds for hope. See also Kant's argument in the *Critique of Judgment* discussed below.

world-order is conducive to moral improvement, which presupposes the belief that a highest wise cause has made it so (the belief in the possibility of moral progress, connected to the postulate of God).¹⁷

This gives us a first key to interpreting the difference between "Nature" and "Providence." As we saw above, Kant argues in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that for purposes of investigating nature and its order, no belief in the existence of a supernatural cause of nature is necessary, because the regulative use of the mere idea will do, and that we should therefore avoid any confusion on this count and speak of "Nature" rather than "divine wisdom." On this ground, he prefers the use of "Nature" for cases in which we are dealing with the systematic unity of the phenomenal realm. Correspondingly, in the "Idea for a Universal History," when he discusses the order in history, he uses the term "Nature."

"Providence" is a more laden term, because it directly refers to God as the cause of the order in the world, but, according to Kant, from a moral point of view this heavier term is apt. This is because from the moral point of view, we need to postulate that a wise author of the world has arranged the world in such a way that it harmonizes with the possibility of what morality demands. We cannot conceive of nature *qua* nature as being in harmony with morality, because the laws of morality are radically independent from those of nature. Thus, on Kant's view we are led to transcend the realm of nature and believe in the existence of a wise creator who is the cause of the harmony of nature and morality. Only then can moral subjects have confidence that their moral ends are realizable in this world (see C1, A807-19/B835-47). Correspondingly, in the "Idea for a Universal History," when Kant shifts to the discussion of the moral relevance of the belief in progress, "Providence" becomes his preferred term.

This account does not only make Kant's shift in terminology understandable, it also explains why he expresses a preference for "Providence" without replacing his earlier usages of the term "Nature." The shift in terminology signals a shift in perspective, and so both expressions are appropriate in one and the same essay, in their respective contexts. Kant uses "Nature" in the bulk of the essay, in which he deals with the issue of the systematic order of historical phenomena. He uses "Providence" at the end of the essay,

¹⁷For a series of essays investigating the relationship between Kant's philosophy of religion and his moral theory, see *Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered*, ed. Philip J. Rossi and Michael Wreen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

in a brief discussion of the importance of the teleological view of history for the moral agent.

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant attributes a similar twofold role to the teleological view of history. Although there are many important differences between Kant's account of teleology in the first and third Critiques, Kant's position remains unchanged regarding the preferability of the term "Nature" over "Providence" or "God" in contexts of the investigation of nature and its order. As in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant explains that in the context of discussions of natural science the term "Nature" is most appropriate. The teleological view of nature implies looking at nature as if its purposiveness were the product of supremely intelligent design,¹⁸ but one should be careful to realize that this is a principle of reflective judgment rather than determinant judgment, and hence that this "should not introduce a special ground of causality" (C3, V, 383). It should not be taken to introduce supernatural explanations for natural phenomena. It is merely an additional perspective from which to investigate nature, and "[t]his is why, in teleology, insofar as it is connected to physics, one rightly speaks of the wisdom, parsimony, provision, beneficence of Nature, without thereby turning it into an intelligent being" (*ibid.*). The interjected clause ("insofar as ...") hints at the possibility that teleology might *also* play a role from the moral point of view, as Kant indeed argues later in the same book.

In §§82–83 of the third Critique, as in the "Idea for a Universal History," history enters Kant's discussion of natural teleology in the context of questions regarding the systematic order of nature. At issue here is the "teleological system in the external relations among organized beings" (§82) and the "ultimate end of nature as a teleological system" (§83). Kant argues that nature as a whole is oriented toward human "culture" (rational development) as its ultimate end, which itself is oriented toward the final end of creation (human beings as moral beings). Thus, he again reaches out into his moral theory and uses the concept of the moral vocation of humankind in order to conceive of nature as a teleological system. Only when nature is conceived in this way, he argues, can it be conceived as a teleological system, because only in this way is the "chain of subordinated ends completely grounded." In this context, Kant uses "Nature" throughout (see V, 425–34).

¹⁸See also Kant's statement that regarding nature as purposive implies regarding it "as if an Understanding contained the ground of the unity of the manifold of [nature's] empirical laws" (C3, V, 180–81).

In the *Critique of Judgment*, as elsewhere, Kant is careful to separate the discussion of natural teleology from that of the postulate of a moral author of the world. Natural teleology does not yield any insight into the cause of nature, and it is "presumptuous" to assert otherwise. From the moral point of view, by contrast, it is not presumptuous to believe that nature is the product of a highest wisdom. Moreover, Kant claims that the moral argument for belief in the existence of God goes through whether or not nature gives us reasons to judge it teleologically (see 478-79). But according to Kant the world does give us reasons to consider it as a teleologically ordered whole (as he argues earlier in the book), and he claims that this provides "welcome confirmation" for the moral subject (479). It confirms (without amounting to a theoretical proof) that nature has been brought into harmony with morality by a highest wise author of the world. Kant does not mention Providence here, but he easily could have. In fact, he uses the even more laden term "God."

II.

Providence as the Cause of the Order in Nature. One might think, on the basis of the preceding discussion, that the distinction between "Nature" and "Providence" runs parallel to the distinction between the theoretical and the moral relevance of the question of progress in history. After all, the shift in terminology coincides with the shift from the question of the systematic unity of nature to the question of what the moral agent may hope. But this impression is not correct. It is true that Kant uses "Providence" when he discusses the moral relevance of historical progress, but he sometimes also uses "Nature," even in these contexts. For example, in his discussion in the section on the "Guarantee of Perpetual Peace," in *Perpetual Peace*, Kant uses the term "Nature" throughout, even though in this book he approaches the question of progress from a moral and juridical perspective.

Therefore, I will now look more closely at the precise difference in emphasis in Kant's uses of the two terms, examining texts in which Kant argues for the assumption of progress on purely moral grounds, especially *Perpetual Peace* and "On the Common Saying." I will show that Kant employs "Nature" when he focuses on the *order* in nature and "Providence" when he considers the *cause* of this order. This explains why "Providence" is used only in the context of his moral theory, and why "Nature" is used in both.

In contrast to the texts discussed earlier, in "On the Common Saying: This May Be True in Theory but It Does Not Apply in Practice" Kant approaches the question of historical progress from the outset as a *moral* question. And significantly, he here again expresses a preference for the term Providence (TP, VIII, 310, 312). Kant starts out with Moses Mendelssohn's claim that there is no species-wide progress in history (other than progress on an individual level). He then develops his own opposing view, claiming that the belief in progress (explicitly including moral progress) can be defended by an appeal to duty:

I base my argument on my innate duty to influence posterity, in every member of the series of generations, in such a way that it continually improves (the possibility of which must hence also be assumed), and that this duty can be rightfully passed on from one generation to the next. (309)

Kant assumes that duty demands that we promote the moral improvement of the youth.¹⁹ He further assumes (in the clause between parentheses) that one needs to assume the possibility of what duty demands. What he means is that when one strives for a certain end, one must implicitly regard that end as attainable, as it would otherwise not be rational to aim for it.²⁰ These premises are to support Kant's claim that humankind is progressing both culturally and morally ("with regard to the moral end of its existence"), and that this progress "may at times be *interrupted*, but never *broken off*" (309).

Underlying this argument is the premise, explained a little later by Kant, that we do not know that the realizability of what morality demands is impossible. If we did, the assumption of its possibility would be irrational. Kant claims that the impossibility cannot be demonstrated and that we are hence justified in assuming "that it is possible" (309), which in this context means assuming that posterity can be improved.

The structure of this argument is familiar from Kant's critical works. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant argues that if morality's demands were

¹⁹This raises the question of how this assertion relates to Kant's denial, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, that there can be a duty to promote the moral perfection of others (see MM, VI, 386). I do not pursue this issue here, as it lies beyond the scope of this essay.

²⁰Kant directs this point against Mendelssohn, who, according to Kant, must also have hoped for the success of his own efforts to further the enlightenment and welfare of Jews (see TP, VIII, 309).

impossible to realize, the moral law which commands us to do so would be "fantastic and directed to empty imaginary ends, and therefore false" (C2, V, 114). Anyone with a consciousness of moral obligation has an interest in avoiding this conclusion, as it would mean that practical reason is untrustworthy. On the grounds that its impossibility cannot be demonstrated and that we have a moral interest in assuming its possibility, Kant argues there that we are justified in assuming the possibility of what morality demands, and in postulating the existence of God and the immortality of the soul as the conditions for its possibility.²¹

There is a problem with Kant's use of this argument form in "On the Common Saying," and it surfaces in the fact that Kant sometimes claims to show that humankind *has been and will be* progressing (see TP, VIII, 308-09), and at other times that we may assume that "it *can* get better in the future" (309; emphasis mine). The second formulation does not imply any claim about progress up till now, nor a belief that there will be progress—just the assumption that progress is *possible*. And in fact, strictly speaking, the second, weaker assumption is all one needs to regard as possible the realization of what duty demands. On the basis of the argument in the second Critique, it would seem neither necessary nor even relevant to know whether there has been progress until now. Even if we knew there had been no progress at all up to this point, our duty to improve the youth would not be reduced to absurdity as long as it could not be shown to be impossible to make progress from now on. All we need to know in order that our moral action aiming at progress not be irrational is that progress is possible if we try hard enough.

But for our present purposes Kant's ambivalence on this count makes no difference, because both versions of his argument require the assumption of the existence of a "highest wisdom" who has arranged nature in such a way that progress is possible. On Kant's view, the concept of nature by itself does not guarantee this possibility in any way. Given that the laws of nature and those of morality are radically independent from each other, the assumption of their harmony requires the further assumption of a cause of this harmony.

After having argued his thesis regarding progress in history, Kant asks "by which means" progress is maintained and accelerated (310). The picture of how history moves forward is in essence the same as in the earlier writ-

²¹Cp. a similar passage in MM, VI, 354-55.

ings: the antagonistic behavior of humans will lead to negative consequences that cause them to establish a state, and the misery resulting from wars will lead states to join a federation aiming at international peace.

Interestingly, in the context of this discussion, Kant expresses a preference for "Providence" over "Nature," on the ground that "highest wisdom" is necessary to realize this progress (310). And "one can regard it as a not inappropriate expression, given the moral wishes and hopes of humans (and given the consciousness of their own impotence), to expect the necessary circumstances from *Providence*" (312). So we see here that Kant indeed introduces Providence by appealing to the necessity of assuming a highest wisdom as the *cause* of the order of nature.

Thus, Kant's preference for "Providence" stems not simply from the fact that the issue of progress is approached from the perspective of the moral agent, but rather, from the fact that this perspective leads one to transcend nature as such and move to the question of the ground or cause of the order in nature. As we saw above, Kant argues that from a theoretical perspective we have no reason to posit the existence of a divine higher cause of nature, and he mentions this as a reason for preferring the use of "Nature" in scientific contexts. But from a moral perspective, he argues, it is rational to believe in the existence of a divine "highest wisdom" that is the cause of the order in nature, and the expression "Providence" is appropriate for referring to this cause. This interpretation, finally, is corroborated in *Perpetual Peace*.

What we have seen so far is that "Nature" is the preferred term when the focus is on the *order* of nature, that "Providence" is preferred when the focus is on the transcendent *cause* of this order, and that the latter focus is relevant and justified only from the moral point of view. Moving now to *Perpetual Peace*, we find a taxonomy of different kinds of Providence and Nature that confirms this pattern. Rather than marking a shift to a clear preference for "Nature," as Laberge claims it does, the text in effect draws the same distinction between "Nature" and "Providence" as the one I outlined above.

At the beginning of the section on the "Guarantee of Perpetual Peace" and in a long footnote, Kant introduces a set of distinctions between different ways of speaking of "Nature," "Providence," and "Fate." Although it makes an antiquated first impression, this taxonomy is quite instructive for the purposes of this paper. As we saw above, Kant explains in the first and third Critiques that it is better to speak of "Nature" than of "Providence" or

"God" when one is concerned with investigating the order in the world of appearances. In *Perpetual Peace*, he affirms this position and elaborates on it by saying that when we are dealing "merely with theory," it is most appropriate to speak of "Nature," because this way of speaking best accommodates the fact that our knowledge is limited to the realm of possible experience. By contrast, when one views the purposiveness of nature *as caused by a higher wisdom* directed to the realization of the final (moral) end of humankind, he says, the expression "Providence" is more suitable (PP, VIII, 361).

Yet although the main argument of *Perpetual Peace* is unambiguously a "practical" (moral and juridical) one, Kant phrases the main part of the section on the "Guarantee of Perpetual Peace" entirely in terms of how *Nature* forces humans in the right direction. After the preceding, however, this should not come as a surprise anymore. "Providence" is used when we regard nature's teleological order as the end of a creator (361, n.; also see Rel, VI 107, n.), that is, when the focus is on the underlying *cause* of the natural teleological order. "Nature" is the better term when the focus is on the *order itself*. And in the section on the "Guarantee of Perpetual Peace," Kant's focus is explicitly on the order of nature, not its cause. He here discusses how nature's teleological order promotes the goal of peace—not what causes it to be so ordered. Therefore, it is understandable that he here uses "Nature."²²

III.

Conclusion. When focusing on the order in the world, Kant chooses the more modest term "Nature." This means that in contexts of physical teleology, "Nature" is always the more appropriate term. Here, "Providence" would detract from the emphasis on the order *in nature*. Therefore, in his philosophy of history, insofar as it is concerned with the question of the systematic unity of the phenomenal world, Kant uses "Nature."

Kant's philosophy of history is also concerned with the moral agent's hope for a better future, however, and in this context Kant uses both terms,

²²This account of the distinction between "Nature" and "Providence" also explains Kant's usage of the terms in the section on the "Character of the Species" in the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Standpoint* (Anthr, VII, 321–33). Here Kant mostly uses "Nature," except where he states that the "education of humankind" can be expected only from Providence (328). Similarly, in the *Contest of the Faculties*, Kant uses "Providence" when he claims that progress can be expected only from a higher wisdom (CF, VII, 93).

depending on his emphasis. He uses "Providence" when he wishes to emphasize that the moral subject needs to postulate the existence of a moral author of the world as the precondition of the realizability of moral ends in the world. He chooses "Nature" when examining the mechanisms by which nature supports the hoped-for progress in history. The difference is a matter of emphasis: "Nature" is the better term for highlighting that historical progress is supported by natural means, but "Providence" is the more apt term for stressing that this order of nature must be regarded as caused by a highest wisdom.²³

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